

Industrial Rags and Wipes -- Pollution Prevention Opportunities

Rags Are Handy, But Expensive

In almost any garage or shop you will find rags and shop towels being used with solvents, lubricants, and cleaners to wipe and clean parts. No doubt about it, rags are handy.

But for many companies, rags have become a problem. They often contain hazardous substances and must be managed and disposed of as an expensive hazardous waste.

Reduce Rag Disposal

Eliminating and reducing toxic materials, waste and pollution helps the environment. It also saves money, creates a healthier work environment, increases your company's efficiency, and makes your company more competitive. Reducing the number of rags disposed of as hazardous waste is a good place to start.

Management Commitment

Establish a management policy to support waste reduction and pollution prevention. Set and track goals for reduction of wastes and emissions. Recognize employee contributions through awards and incentives.

Encourage Involvement

Ask employees to minimize use of toxic substances which make the rags hazardous waste. Encourage employees to make suggestions on substitutes and other ways to minimize toxics. Ask vendors for less toxic processes and materials.

Involve customers by helping them understand the environmental impacts associated with the use of various materials. If possible, show customers that their choices can have an impact on the environment and provide them with affordable, environmentally-preferable choices.

Reduce the Necessity for Cleaning

Coordinate production thereby reducing the number of cleanups. Schedule similar jobs consecutively to reduce setup time and cleanups.

Substitute Non-Toxic Materials

Examine your inventory and past purchases of cleaners, lubricants, and solvents. Determine what is essential or unnecessary for your process and institute purchasing controls.

Review Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) for necessary materials in order to determine if less toxic substitutes are feasible. Ask the vendor, your trade association, and others about nonhazardous substitutes. Avoid materials that are flammable, contain VOCs and have a low vapor pressure (less than 10 mm mercury).

After some trial and error, you may be successful in eliminating a dangerous material from your workplace.

Reduce Toxic Use

Studies show that workers use less of a cleaner if they spray it on a rag and then apply it to the part instead of soaking the rag in the cleaner first. Automatic parts washers can reduce rag use. Covering solvents can reduce evaporation.

Wring out Rags

Use hand or mechanical wringing or a centrifuge to remove excess solvent from rags. Vendors can provide equipment for solvent recovery and recycling. Be sure to check fire codes, ventilation and electrical requirements. The recovered solvent should be stored in a closed, marked container.

Lease or Launder Shop Rags

Leased rags are typically sent to an industrial laundry for washing.

Rags contaminated with solvent are not considered hazardous wastes if they are not saturated and are laundered and reused. They should be sent to an industrial laundry which has a water treatment system and oil separator to prevent hazardous materials from entering the sanitary sewers.

Disposable Wipes

Disposable wipes can reduce rag disposal and solvent use. Disposables are smaller and contain a prepared amount of solvent. Disposables that contain hazardous materials should be handled as a hazardous waste.

Implement Controls

Make an "OK To Purchase" list of materials that are essential. Require special approval to purchase others. Limit inventory access.

Track use of toxic materials at the operator level. Track waste generation and make departments accountable for waste streams they generate. Make waste minimization a factor in employee performance evaluations.

Use Current Inventory

Always try to completely use materials in stock before the expiration date.